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Costa Rica gets U.S. military advisers

By Walter Andrews
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The United States is dispatching a score of Special Forces advisers to Costa Rica at the request of the Central American nation, the Pentagon said last night.

Costa Rica is one of three Central American countries bordering on Nicaragua, against which the United States declared a trade embargo last week after Congress refused to fund aid for insurgents fighting Nicaragua's leftist Sandinista government. The United States already has advisers training troops in the other two, El Salvador and Honduras.

"The Costa Rican government has requested, and we will send, a mobile training team of 20 to 24

Army Special Forces personnel to Costa Rica for a three-month period to train four companies of Costa Rican special forces," a Pentagon spokesman said.

It is believed this is the first use of American advisers in Costa Rica, where many Nicaraguans have fled to avoid conscription and various armed groups are operating. The country has a 5,000-man Civil Guard but no regular army.

The Defense Department made no announcement of the move, but a spokesman read the brief paragraph in response to queries by reporters.

The Pentagon spokesman said the U.S. Special Forces will start their duties in Costa Rica May 15. When the assignment is completed, the U.S. advisers will return to their base in Panama, he said.

Two companies of Costa Rican special forces will be trained in the first six weeks, and another two in the second six-week period, the spokesman said. U.S. military assistance training funds will be used to finance the training of the four Costa Rican companies.

A government official in Costa Rica said the American advisers were expected to oversee training at

El Murcielgo Hacienda, a ranch in Guanacaste province less than 10 miles from the Nicaraguan border and once owned by the late Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza.

The advisers will begin teaching counterinsurgency techniques to some 700 Civil Guards May 15 at the ranch about 130 miles northwest of San Jose, Costa Rica's capital, said the official, who asked to remain anonymous.

He said an "anti-guerrilla commando team" intended to prevent Marxist rebels from entering Costa Rica also will be trained.

"The course will be divided in two stages lasting until September and will include officer preparation, the handling of arms and strategic defensive military training," he said.

Relations between Costa Rica and Nicaragua have grown increasingly tense since the Sandinistas overthrew the Somoza regime in July 1979. Rebels fighting the Nicaragua government operate along the northern Costa Rican border, and Costa Rican President Luis Alberto Monge has frequently denounced cross-border attacks by the Nicaraguan army.

There is growing concern in San Jose that the upheaval in Central America, which has involved Nicaragua, El Salvador and, to a lesser extent, Honduras, will also involve the Costa Ricans.

Just last week, intelligence reports surfaced that an extreme left-wing party in Costa Rica recruited a combat group and dispatched it to battle anti-Sandinista forces in southern Nicaragua.

This has provoked concern such operations might serve as a springboard for an insurgency within Costa Rica itself.

The combat group was organized by the Costa Rica Communist People's Party, which has a close working relationship with the Sandinistas.

The same reports also said the CPP has "military contingents" along the Costa Rican-Nicaraguan border as well as an efficient "border apparatus" that works in tandem with the Sandinistas in providing secure passage for material shipped between the two countries.

The Costa Rica border area is the staging ground for the smaller of the

two anti-Sandinista Nicaraguan resistance forces. Its political arm is the Revolutionary Alliance (ARDE), and the chief military figure is Eden Pastora, the legendary Comandante Zero who led the attack on the Somoza regime and held members of his government captive.

As the incidents involving Costa Rica and the Sandinistas multiplied, Costa Rica has repeatedly taken its case to the Organization of American States to complain that its neutrality was being violated.

This story is based in part on wire-service reports.